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Falling Down the Rabbit Hole: Exploring the Unique Partnership Between Subject Librarians and Scholarly Communication

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Abstract

Subject librarians are uniquely poised to facilitate conversations and assistance about scholarly communication topics to faculty and students—helping make the connections between scholarly communication and discipline-specific research. The University of Central Florida (UCF) Libraries offers a unique intersection between scholarly communication and subject librarians by implementing a robust subject librarian model that includes activities related to scholarly communication and partnering with UCF's Office of Scholarly Communication to provide support on a variety of topics to the campus community. In particular, this model has been particularly effective with STEM disciplines. The subject librarians in these respective disciplines have actively partnered with the Office of Scholarly Communication to provide a series of workshops targeted to STEM faculty on topics such as predatory publishing. These conversations have prompted invitations to speak at college and department meetings and to provide additional assistance and support on these scholarly communication topics. It has also led to a research project conducted by the science, engineering, and computer science librarians and the scholarly communication librarian on the open access publishing practices and trends of UCF STEM faculty to help better inform conversations and research support to these faculty. This article will explore the various ways in which this unique model aids UCF Libraries in providing scholarly communication support to faculty and students in an effective way and will share specific strategies and examples that readers can practically implement at their respective institutions.

Overview

Subject librarians play a critical role in providing discipline-specific support to faculty and students at their institution. With this in mind, they offer a unique perspective when approaching and facilitating scholarly communication-specific support to their discipline-specific populations. The University of Central Florida (UCF) Libraries offers a unique intersection between scholarly communication and subject librarian roles with a robust subject librarian model that incorporates scholarly communication activities in dynamic and meaningful ways. The library's Office of Scholarly Communication (OSC) provides scholarly communication support broadly at UCF and partners with subject librarians to provide support on a variety of topics to the campus community. This article will highlight these activities and partnerships, provide historical context, and explore STEM-specific collaborations that exemplify successful scholarly communication and subject librarians at the institution.

History and Background

The University of Central Florida (UCF) is one of 12 state universities in Florida and currently ranks as the largest university by enrollment in the state and one of the largest in the nation (UCF Facts, 2019–2020). With over 69,000 students and emerging preeminent status, UCF has a strong emphasis on research. The University of Central Florida Libraries aims to support these needs by providing a variety of research-focused services and resources to faculty and students. Scholarly communication support, in particular, has been an important area of emphasis for UCF Libraries. While scholarly communication has always been at the forefront of academic library services, formal efforts to support scholarly communication needs developed incrementally at UCF Libraries.

Scholarly Communication at UCF

The University of Central Florida Libraries' approach to scholarly communication has evolved over time

from informal support and practice to the development of its Office of Scholarly Communication (OSC). These efforts to formalize scholarly communication activities began in 2011, when UCF Libraries formed a Scholarly Communication Task Force. It aimed to explore the state of scholarly communication broadly in academia and to “make recommendations regarding the role that UCF Libraries could play in shaping the future of scholarly communication at UCF” (Beile & Gause, 2013). From the beginning and through the development of this Task Force, UCF Libraries approached scholarly communication efforts collaboratively. In fact, the Task Force itself included librarians and library staff from a variety of departments within the library. The Task Force produced a white paper reflecting their findings and recommendations. Ultimately, this led to several efforts including the development of the Research Lifecycle (RLC) and the creation of the UCF Libraries’ Office of Scholarly Communication.

The Research Lifecycle, a mental model that represents the components of a 21st-century research lifecycle, provided a visual way to identify campus-wide support and services available to UCF researchers (Research Lifecycle, 2015). From the beginning, subject librarians were not only instrumental in the development of the RLC but were also key in providing expertise in specialized scholarly communication services. These specialized services were visually identified as blue buttons on the Research Lifecycle, with many subject librarians being known as “Blue Button Experts.”

In addition to the research support through the Research Lifecycle and the services associated with it, UCF Libraries also formed a Scholarly Communication Working Advisory Group while it was developing a formal Office of Scholarly Communication. This group, composed of over 20 librarians and library staff from various departments in the library (Staff Directory: Scholarly Communication, 2019), participates in scholarly communication outreach, marketing, and education efforts. Like the development of the RLC, subject librarians have played a key role in these activities from the very beginning of the working advisory group’s development and have remained active participants. While this working advisory group is the foundation of the Office of Scholarly Communication, UCF Libraries further developed the OSC by hiring its first scholarly communication librarian in 2015. The role of the scholarly communication librarian is to lead the efforts of the Office of Scholarly Communication, partner with library and campus units, and provide support

on scholarly communication topics to the library and broadly at the institution. In particular, the collaboration with Research and Information Services and Acquisitions and Collection Services has led to a dynamic subject librarian Initiative at UCF Libraries.

Subject Librarians at UCF

Like many reference departments, UCF Libraries functioned for many years in a traditional manner providing reference services to all library patrons at the Research and Information Services (RIS) desk. This included all reference librarians being assigned a certain number of hours to staff the desk, including nights and weekends. Additionally, all reference librarians shared duties in providing library instruction on general education courses, covering classes primarily in the English and History departments. If no one with subject expertise was able to teach a specific class, librarians were asked to provide instruction on areas that they might not be familiar with or have background information about. This proved problematic, as librarians would need to familiarize themselves with a subject area and appropriate discipline-specific databases. In addition to staffing the reference desk and library instruction, Collection Development was another major component of each librarian’s responsibilities. Like the instruction sessions, librarians were generally given a specific subject area based on availability rather than on the librarian’s area of expertise or comfort level. This particular model remained in place until 2013 when the RIS Department instituted a new subject librarian initiative.

This initiative provided RIS with new opportunities. In particular, it allowed the department to shift its traditional reactive approach to patron needs to a reactive one. As noted by Arthur and Tierney (2013), the original model had been changed to a subject librarian service model that emphasized “the importance of proactive Subject Librarian outreach to the University of Central Florida constituencies in support of collection development; scholarly communication; and faculty/student teaching, learning, and research.” The goal of this new service model was to build upon and increase the positive impact already achieved on student learning, faculty teaching and research, and scholarly communication outreach (Norris, Dotson, Tierney, & Harrison, 2017). It is with that expectation that the new model would promote higher visibility and accessibility for all subject librarians on campus and in local, state, regional, national, and international venues.

The new model was formed in collaboration with three library units, RIS, the Acquisitions and Collections Services Department, and the Office of Scholarly Communication. It was intended to help realign the librarians' subject assignments with a particular college and/or department with the goal of positively impacting collection development, scholarly communication, and faculty and student teaching, learning, and research (Arthur & Tierney, 2013). Pragmatically, subject librarians are now encouraged to provide practical assistance to faculty and students and help them navigate the complexities of scholarly communication topics. Subject librarians are also expected to undertake both academic department and faculty profiling. As explained in Arthur & Tierney (2013), conducting academic profiling allowed subject librarians to not only get acquainted with their assigned departments and faculty but also allowed for more refined and targeted services and resources to their respective faculty and discipline-specific programs. With subject librarian roles in place and the incorporation of scholarly communication activities well situated within this model, the OSC and RIS departments have been able to develop a deep collaborative relationship. The relationship between STEM librarians and scholarly communication, in particular, has proven quite successful.

Impetus for Collaboration

The beginning of our work on STEM scholarly communication initiatives began with a discussion about how we could engage and help bring timely, relevant content to UCF faculty through the lens of open access. Upon a meeting of the team, which included our scholarly communication librarian, engineering and computer science librarian, and science librarian, it made sense to start a conversation regarding predatory publishing. This was important to bring up since faculty have had questions regarding the pitfalls surrounding some of the deceptive practices happening in academic publishing as of late. With this as the focal point, the team put together a well-received presentation to faculty titled, "Hijacked Journals: How Open Access Journals Fall Into the Predatory Publishing Trap" (Norris, Basco, & Avila, 2018). The presentation was well attended and an engaging dialogue ensued.

The presentation covered four major topics: (1) defining predatory publishing, (2) the connection between predatory publishing and open access, (3) characteristics of predatory publishing journals, monographs, and conferences, and (4) tips on how

to avoid predatory publishers. In the presentation, an initial scan of UCF Engineering and Computer Science (ECS) faculty CV's was conducted using the database Web of Science, based on existing criteria to aid in identifying a journal as predatory or deceptive. This initial scan did not identify any ECS faculty who had published in such journals, helping reinforce positive perceptions of open access publications for faculty.

Upon completion of the predatory publishing workshop our engineering and computer science librarian and science librarian conducted a larger scan of UCF faculty from the College of Sciences, the College of Engineering and Computer Science, and the College of Optics and Photonics. Through this analysis it was found that no UCF faculty from these three colleges were identified as having published in a journal with predatory and/or deceptive practices. After this was conducted, an American Library Association (ALA) poster (Avila & Basco, 2018) was developed to present the findings at the ALA Annual Meeting's Science and Technology Section Poster Session in June 2018.

Strategies for Establishing Successful Scholarly Communication Collaborations

Upon reflection of the collaborative activities of the past year, UCF identified strategies that could be useful to other institutions and librarians interested in exploring these types of partnerships. After assessing our original programming ideas, we were able to identify several strategies for establishing productive collaborations between our scholarly communication librarian and our STEM subject librarians. The first is making a connection with discipline-specific focused team members within the same institution, to discuss topical ideas for workshops and programming. Harnessing the power of subject specialists allows for more targeted and relevant services for faculty and students. Subject librarians have a depth of knowledge and understanding in their assigned academic areas and are an excellent source for subject-specific information.

A second strategy relates to identifying faculty interests and working to foster them based on interest and concerns they communicate with the library. Using faculty-driven questions as a stepping-stone for the creation of programming content is ideal. This particular strategy is helpful in increasing faculty attendance, since the topics for the library presentations originate from their input and serve their direct interests. Areas of faculty interest can also

emerge from university-level committees and open access-focused initiatives.

Another strategy includes gaining information from other library sources outside of the normal RIS and OSC channels. For example, seeking information on trends occurring in the broader publishing sector by communicating with the library Acquisitions and/or Electronic Resources departments can be quite illuminating. Read & Publish, for instance, is an emerging journal model that librarians in all areas should familiarize themselves with and understand how it may impact the library, teaching faculty, and academic institutions. Familiarizing oneself with this model, for instance, and learning about how vendors interpret library trends is important to both the library and university faculty. Understanding new trends and being able to deliver relevant content on these topics that explains the impacts on academia is another way to form effective scholarly communication collaborations. While not a comprehensive list, these specific strategies provide an excellent foundation to aid in successful collaborations within the academic library's scholarly communication channels.

Collaboration Examples

Collaborations come in a variety of forms and are aimed at specific campus constituents. In a review of our STEM scholarly communication collaborations, there are specific examples from both student-focused and faculty-focused perspectives. As we have learned, it serves one's local academic community well to distinguish between the two and develop programming in line with an institution's initiatives and focus.

Student-Focused

Student-focused activities are best exemplified by three types of examples. First, there are research consultation referrals. Research consultations consist of a subject librarian meeting with a student, usually on a one-on-one basis, to assist students with research-related questions. During these sessions, students may ask specific questions related to academic publishing, copyright, or other scholarly communication topics. They often do not realize that the library has an Office of Scholarly Communication. It is during this inquiry that many students are made aware of the OSC for the very first time. At this initial point of contact and mention of the OSC, students are shown the official OSC webpage and other resources like our scholarly communication research

guide. These are all great resources to share with students as many of their particular questions will need longer sessions with multiple librarians in order to have all their concerns addressed.

Another example of student-focused collaboration is based on library programming and joint instruction. The STEM scholarly communication team has worked together on several joint events where STEM topics have been shared along with separate instruction on scholarly communication themes. Some examples of collaborative sessions include a welcome event for international graduate students, graduate orientation, graduate workshops like copyright and author rights, citation metrics, literature reviews, and apps for research. Utilizing a joint presentation space to share STEM-related programming along with scholarly communication topics is an excellent way to collaborate and to disseminate important useful information to students in one single event.

One final example of student-focused collaboration is incorporating scholarly communication topics into a discipline-specific context. Recently, UCF Libraries held a series of four workshops, titled STEM Bootcamp: Research, Data, and Tools. During these four workshops, the scholarly communication librarian worked with the STEM librarians, digital initiatives librarian, and other subject librarians to hold presentations on a variety of topics, including data management and data visualization. Leveraging subject librarian expertise helped generate successful events that were extremely valuable to both undergraduate and graduate students. Like many of these collaborative opportunities, librarians with various expertise working together on a series of presentations provides strong support to students on a number of different academic topics.

Faculty-Focused

An example of faculty-focused STEM scholarly communication collaborative efforts starts with faculty questions and one-on-one questions. The UCF scholarly communication librarian receives questions either referred by subject librarians or by direct faculty inquiry. When subject librarians meet with their faculty, scholarly communication efforts may come up and therefore related questions may arise. At that time, a mention of the OSC is presented and sometimes faculty will reach out directly to the unit to find support. With regard to STEM in particular, questions related to predatory publishing have increased exponentially during the most recent academic year.

A second example of faculty-focused STEM collaboration is faculty college and departmental meetings. Invitations for the subject librarian to attend a college-wide or department meeting is a usual occurrence. A good way to collaborate is to have the scholarly communication librarian attend the meetings in person with the subject librarian to share updates that might be timely for the department or college. Typically the subject librarian facilitates the invitations, though on occasion the scholarly communication librarian may receive direct invitations to speak. Regardless of invitation method, both the subject librarians and scholarly communication librarian are in constant contact to ensure good communication. In the case of STEM collaborations, the scholarly communication librarian has received direct invitations to speak with STEM faculty after they attended the team's predatory publishing workshop. Having this willingness to partner provides a great tool for faculty, allows them to get to know librarians better, and provides stronger, more effective support.

Coming full circle, the predatory publishing workshop, which was the impetus of the initial scholarly communication and STEM collaborations, continues to prove fruitful. The workshop was well received and was requested to be presented to specific departments and campus units. Our scholarly communication librarian was also asked to speak at several STEM meetings in the College of Sciences including the Statistics & Data Science Department, as well as a College of Sciences Deans and Chairs meeting. Having the opportunity to speak at these high-level meetings is a testament to the power of collaboration. This particular workshop was so popular that it even sparked an invited speaker opportunity at a national library conference venue, as well as generating continued interest from faculty around campus. With this continued interest in the topic, a variety of versions of the same workshop will be developed and presented around campus and at library conferences. The most recent discussion at a university committee on research, for example, has brought forward the development of a podcast series led by our scholarly communication librarians and additional workshop requests surrounding open access initiatives.

Next Steps and Takeaways

The initial collaboration between the STEM and scholarly communication librarians illustrates how subject librarian and scholarly communication collaborations can prove successful. More projects are being planned to extend and create new and

innovative programs and outreach to the university community. One possibility being considered is to host ACS on Campus (ACS on Campus, 2019), the American Chemical Society's outreach program where students will have the opportunity to learn about publishing, career opportunities, and hear from experts in their field. For the faculty and some students as well, the library aims to invite Web of Science to conduct a workshop on Publons (Publons, n.d.). Faculty members have always been interested in tracking their publications, and with Publons they can track their publications and get citation metrics, verify peer reviews, and retrieve a journal editing history. Additional plans include having a broader library-wide discussion about the Read & Publish model and how to best provide support to faculty and students on this topic. Continuing to respond to interest about predatory publishing, the library aims to increase workshop and outreach offerings and expand the topic to incorporate other predatory and deceptive practices in these programs. Lastly, the scholarly communication and STEM librarians plan to hold "on location" office hours outside the library. The goal of these office hours is to provide access to librarian expertise in convenient locations for faculty and students and to connect with those who may not be aware of the extensive resources available to them or who rarely visit the library.

In looking back on our collaborations, we offer a few takeaways that we hope are helpful to those who are interested in implementing these types of workshops at their academic institutions. As we learned, time is an important consideration. Allow plenty of time for sufficient planning. In managing multiple individuals, scheduling can be an issue. Building in extra buffers of time is quite helpful when it gets close to the presentation date. Next, know that there is real strength and strong support when working in collaborative teams. Leveraging colleagues with a variety of expertise is extremely beneficial to creating an impactful series of events and programs for faculty and students. Librarians should not be afraid to reach out to other departments within the library to leverage knowledge and expertise. Lastly, there is a compelling interest in emerging trends and hot topics, such as predatory and deceptive publishing. Academic libraries should consider harnessing this interest to spur engaging conversations at their institution.

Conclusion

While new collaborations may feel like falling down the rabbit hole, as UCF STEM librarians and the

Office of Scholarly Communication have learned, they can provide positive and productive partnerships if one is willing to explore new opportunities. As explored in this article, leveraging subject-specific expertise and incorporating scholarly communication

topics into library services aids in successful and dynamic outreach to faculty and students. Librarians can use strategies implemented and lessons learned from UCF Libraries' collaborative efforts to develop similar collaborations at their respective institutions.

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